

# The Holocaust in American Life

## A Review

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*The Holocaust in American Life*, by Peter Novick, Mariner Books, New York, 1999, 373 pp.

Sometime very late in the Twentieth Century, Jewish Historian Peter Novick chose to write a book whose title very aptly described its subject, *The Holocaust in American Life*. Clearly, based on a reading of the book, Novick had grave concerns about the subject. In a word, if I may provide one, Novick disapproved of the uses and interpretations the subject was receiving in America. In some cases, he was concerned about the accuracy of the historical revisionism deployed to serve the various purposes of interested actors; in others (with much overlap among the cases), he was concerned about the effects of these uses, aside from the purposes themselves of participants in the great game of exploiting what had by then quite firmly been emplaced in American consciousness as “The Holocaust.”

At the present remove, the context of this “New York Times Notable Book” might be clearer, and hence more interesting, than it was at the time of its publication and of most of the extant reviews of it. Most-notable, to me, is the appearance of Jewish political Scientist Norman Finkelstein’s bestseller *The Holocaust Industry* the following year. Both scholars, as it happens, lived in Chicago, and I have no doubt that they met, and perhaps exchanged an idea or two, most-likely after the publication of the book here reviewed. Novick’s book clearly inspired, and to some extent undergirded, Finkelstein’s more-successful work of the following year.

In his attack on Polemicist Finkelstein, Jewish legal Sensationalist Alan Dershowitz, in fact, sought to enlist Novick—who had criticized Finkelstein’s exposé—in Dershowitz’s (ultimately successful) campaign to have Finkelstein banished from the academic community. Our author would have none of it. When requested to specify “the dirt” to which he had nonspecifically alluded in previous comments on Finkelstein’s book, he declined, ostensibly because he felt that fulfilling such a request violated ancient tenets of intramural professional respect, though the possibility of a lack of specifics might haunt the imaginings of a skeptical observer of the exchanges.

So much for the publishing context. From the perspective of 2014, much more can be gained from a contemplation of what Peter Novick, who died in 2012 after publishing no further books, had to say on his subject these fourteen years ago. It is, indeed, telling, if only on the score of how Novick’s fears have been borne out. This is because, despite Novick’s concerns, and Finkelstein’s numerous (he has continued publishing, most vigorously) alarms, the prominence of The Holocaust appears to me to have grown, at least in terms of media, academic, and even legal “noise,” including enactment and enforcement of laws punishing “Holocaust denial” and even “historical revisionism.”

I think Novick would be dismayed to see what has occurred since the publication of his concerns, much as Finkelstein also seems to have been ignored, or successfully neutralized, in developments since the times of publication of their respective broadsides. Novick’s contribution, however, deserves place of pride not only in terms of when it appeared, but further in terms of its “angle of approach,” an angle that leaves unsullied the sentiments of those who are committed to the still-regnant (large) version of the events of that “Holocaust,” a spirit, by the way, that Finkelstein’s subsequent forays leave altogether

undamaged. Novick, like Finkelstein, leaves the meme of the Six Million altogether sacrosanct. Both of these sentries may have the same ultimate goal in view: that of warning zealots that the matter might be taken too far—too far, that is, to serve the interests of those promoting it, and too far to withstand the inevitable scrutiny of subsequent historical inquiry—of credibility itself.

Novick is, in any case, a historian, in contrast to whom Finkelstein might be viewed as more of a journalist, this distinction perhaps explaining to some extent the failure of the two quite to “mesh” with each other’s treatments of their shared subject. But Finkelstein, if only on the score of his younger age, is “downstream” of Novick, and Novick’s work is the subject of this review.



*Memorial Plaque at Sachsenhausen for the homosexual victims of National Socialism*  
By Txl gkhs (Own work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Novick was certainly eminently qualified to give this topic a thorough, insightful treatment. He was Jewish, but people who knew him described him as “non-observant,” a description possibly fitting a majority of American “Jews.” It does not appear that he “lost” any European relatives to (in, or during) the Holocaust. He was by 1999 a respected historian, author, among other things of a 1988 book titled *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, a book whose index lacks the keywords Holocaust, Revisionism, or Israel.

From the present time, Novick might be tested as to whether he was prescient. But he undertook no prescience, as such. He merely stated, in terms well-supported and trenchantly defended, reasons why he felt trends in the uses being made by various interests (most of them Jewish and/or Israeli) boded ill for the future, in which prediction he was resoundingly correct. But perhaps the greatest value of his work comes from: (a) cataloging and interpreting all the various uses the Holocaust was subject to in America since at least 1938; and (b) tracing and analyzing the changes in those manifold uses and identifying their impetuses in a manner quite befitting a professional historian.

His treatment of Holocaust revisionists is brief, and telling. First, he erected and attacked the straw man of “Holocaust deniers,” so smearing Arthur Butz, the only individual he named in his treatment of the subject. Having erected the straw man, he then correctly stated that the numbers of people fitting the description, as well as their collective influence, is pitifully small. He eschewed actual invective against the cadre he so roundly dismissed, but he even more-assiduously avoided admitting any possibility that the revisionists (to revert to the name of a real, and much larger, if embattled, group) had either sound motives, valid approaches, or accurate information on anything whatsoever. But his analysis of the phenomenon is conducted in the course of disparaging the counter-denial movement mounted so volubly and profitably by, among others, Deborah Lipstadt. His ultimate conclusion: it’s unnecessary and unseemly. The whole discussion is sure to arouse mixed feelings among revisionists.

Novick’s support for the mainstream body of Holocaust sensationalism appears frequently in the book. It is firm, unequivocal, and full-throated. Such a performance would not be notable in itself—in 2014 as in 1999—but the attentive reader will be struck, if not outraged, to find the author spiritedly engaging in his own Holocaust revisionism as concerns a group of victims who are not, at least *per se*, Jewish. That group is homosexuals, whom the National Socialists prosecuted only in aggravated cases involving rape, pedophilia, or other public disturbances promoting the offender’s “alternative sexual orientation.”

Here is Novick the Holocaust revisionist on page 223 of the paperback version:

*Claims by gay activists and their supporters for the number of homosexuals killed by the Third Reich reach as high as one million, and assertions that it was a quarter of a million or half a million are common. The actual number of gays who died or were killed in the camps appears to be around five thousand, conceivably as high as ten thousand. But unlike other groups that wanted to be recognized as victims of the Holocaust, gays do have political and cultural resources ...*

The metaphorical “elephant in the living room” of argumentative omission seems usually at least to be silent, but this one in Novick’s living room fairly *trumpets* the omission of Jews as a claimant group and their own extravagant claims of numbers of victims. But from Eminent Historian Peter Novick, not the faintest peep as to these. Gays’, sure. Jews’, never. Perhaps our author was a homophobe, but if he was, he demonstrated it by revealing truths such as he would not reveal concerning a larger, more influential group that he more-likely identified with. The double standard is blindingly apparent here.

Fortunately, gaffes of this magnitude are largely absent from Novick’s treatment, and leaves it—the great majority of the book—relevant, informative, well supported, and even readable. His only other omission, reparation payments from Germany, he could have chosen to omit because it did not concern only—or particularly—recipients in America, though I’d confidently wager that the bulk of payments have gone to recipients in that country ever since they were instituted in 1952. But *they’re* global, right? His omission of the ambiguous reception Holocaust victims received in Israel is, again, mercifully excludable because the subject—right there in the title—concerns the Holocaust in *American life*.<sup>[1]</sup>

The overarching insights conveyed by this account have to do with the historian’s stock in trade: time. In 1945, much was known concerning the Holocaust by the people who cared most about it, at least as concerns the mythology and hyperbole that constitutes its popular incarnation to this day. Awareness of the falsity of these has dawned but slowly, if at all, among this initial cohort of curators of the story, but it matters little today, as most of them are dead, or of very advanced age.

But the popularization, the discussion, the promotion (or whatever the opposite of censorship might be) of the tale underwent a succession of metamorphoses during the period 1945–1999 that Novick went to great lengths to chronicle and analyze. Anyone who was sapient in the 1950s, particularly if he lived among Jews or had Jewish friends (as I did) is well aware that the Holocaust had absolutely nothing of the prominence that it commands in today’s discourse. Why so? Our author devotes many pages and references to an explanation of that, and he identified the pivotal point, Israel’s 1967 attack on its Arab neighbors, that became the focal point of the subsequent analyses offered by Norman Finkelstein. Anyone who wonders just how this sea change came about will be well rewarded by Novick’s account. He was there, and unlike many of the rest of us, he was a historian, at least up to the point where he wrote this book.

Even though his analysis cut off fourteen years ago, the trends he adduced are starkly familiar in the world of 2014.

Only more so. If Peter Novick were with us in today’s world, the realizations of his fears of 1999 would, I suspect, be so extreme as to silence him utterly, at least on this subject.

Much as it silences the growing numbers of us alive today who might otherwise undertake realistic analyses of it. Today, we are well past the “end game” of the Holocaust enterprise. We are, instead, approaching the end itself. And, on the score of the ever-increasing ferocity of its defenders, it will not be a game.

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**Notes:**

[\[1\]](#) The book was released in the UK under the title *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*.

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